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Teresa Brown

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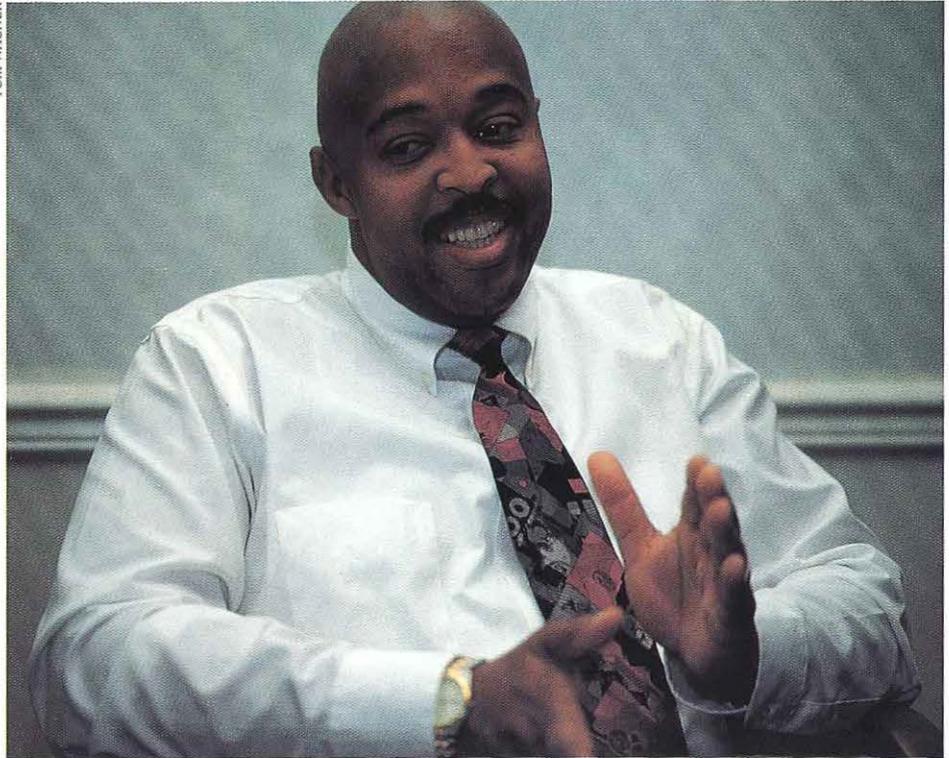
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Goliath Davis

On the road to glory

TOM WAGNER



TO GET TO WHERE Goliath Davis' voyage began, to become St. Petersburg's first black police chief, you must leave headquarters, travel north and make a left onto 13th Street into Jamestown, a neighborhood of humble homes and tiny businesses.

At 13th Street, continue driving east for another four or five blocks. It was there, on the steps of his grandmother's porch, that Davis had a conversation with his former mentor that changed his life forever.

Freddie Lee Crawford, one of the first black men to join the city's all-white police force, stopped by one afternoon while policing the predominantly black, working-class community where Davis was born and raised.

At 23, Davis had already earned a bachelor's degree in behavioral science from Rollins College. He had also studied in the West Indies, Bahamas and France and was now pondering his future.

Why not give law enforcement a try? Crawford asked.

Before the young man could finish airing his laundry list of reasons about why he couldn't—or wouldn't—join the force, Crawford told Davis that instead of criticizing the police department, he should try to bring about change.

"He said you can't criticize the police department if you don't become actively involved in trying to change things," Davis recalled. "Make a difference. Do something that is going to be worthwhile that will also be rewarding and would make a contribution to the city."

Davis did just that.

He joined the department in September 1973, and quickly became known as a no-nonsense officer who expected no less than the best from himself and his colleagues. Davis' career includes stints as a public safety agent, a recruiter, an adjunct college professor and a patrol officer in his old neighborhood.

Davis was promoted to deputy chief in 1984 and assistant chief in 1989. Since then, he has headed the patrol services and administrative services division. In between assignments and promotions, Davis attended the John F. Kennedy School of Government. He also earned a master's degree in criminal justice from USF and a doctorate in

criminology from Florida State University.

On Aug. 5, 14 years after Davis took Crawford up on his challenge, Mayor David Fischer appointed the father of three to replace Darryl Stephens as St. Petersburg's first African-American chief of police.

"I didn't think of it as some history-making event," the 46-year-old Davis said. "I thought about it in the context of where we are as a city, where we've been and where the mayor was trying to go, and I questioned whether I had something to add to it. I thought I had, so I said I'd give it a shot."

The appointment, however, came months after a restless black community erupted in violence when a police officer fatally shot a black motorist.

While some may have seen Fischer's move as some sort of concession to the unrest, Davis' supporters said he is definitely not a token police chief. He was the man best prepared through education and experience to hold the job.

"Goliath Davis has the credentials," Ernest Williams, a former police officer, told local reporters after Fischer announced the promotion.

"The question is, given the organization and some of the members he's dealing with, whether he can really move them to his philosophy and direction. I think it's something that can work,

but it will take a lot of work."

Though Davis hasn't revealed the specifics of the goals he has for his 700 officers and civilian staff members in the coming years, he is eager to share his philosophy about the success behind police work: "Treat people fairly and follow your convictions."

Yet, in Davis' mind, his toughest challenge is living up to the expectations of his constituents—both black and white.

"The expectations in the African-American community are exaggerated to the extent that they assume or expect that I can do things that maybe procedurally or legally I can't do," Davis explained. "The expectations in the majority community or the white community is such that some perceive that because I am African-American, I'm home-grown, that we won't have any more disturbances."

The St. Petersburg High School graduate said neither assumption is correct.

"I want to let everybody know that it's going to take more than me to deal with the issues that confront law enforcement and society," Davis said. "I am not going to assume or take on the burden of 'The Savior,' because I can't do that. I am going to need everybody: the African-American community, the Caucasian community, the business community, the education community, everybody, so we can get to the business of straightening things out."

By Teresa D. Brown

"Treat people fairly and follow your convictions."
— Goliath Davis